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ABSTRACT

A review of Knowles' andragogical model (1984) and Pratt's writings (1988) on the appropriateness of learner-centered instruction established that, even though learners may need both direction and support, they can still be involved in designing/directing their own learning in meaningful ways. Adult educators can obtain information about the amount/type of direction learners require through needs assessments in which adult learners participate as partners. Adult educators can use the following strategies to create learning environments fostering a sense of support for and partnership with adult learners: capitalize on the first session, incorporate group work, break the traditional classroom routine, use humor, and support opportunities for individual problem solving. Because many adults have not previously experienced support or equality in the learning environment, they have often felt disconnected and disengaged from formal learning tasks. To engage such previously disengaged persons in the learning process, adult educators must take the following steps: consider their attitudes toward and knowledge about the variety of people they teach; think through the way they present their subjects or topics; and analyze their expectations for the potential of learners to ensure that they are not based on an individual's membership in a particular community. (MN)

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Guidelines for Working with Adult Learners
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Guidelines for Working with Adult Learners

by Susan Imel

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> *The adults did not have to be there: if the class was disagreeable, they could simply stop coming. In teaching [adults], the customer, not the subject, comes first and is always right, and the customer is the learner.* (Rogers 1989, p. 3)

"Adults vote with their feet," a favorite adage of adult educators, is frequently used to describe a characteristic of adult learners. In most circumstances, adults are not captive learners and, if the learning situation does not suit their needs and interests, they will simply stop coming. In discussing adult education, Knowles (1980, 1984) distinguished between teacher-centered and learner-centered instruction. He promoted the latter because it viewed learners as mutual partners in the learning endeavor (Merriam and Caffarella 1991). Known as the andragogical model, the use of learner-centered instruction—which supports addressing the needs and interests of learners—is regularly championed in the literature as the most effective way to teach adults. However, Merriam and Caffarella (ibid.) assert that "adult learning in formal settings, for the most part, is still instructor designed and directed" (p. 26). Given the wide support for learner involvement, the discrepancy between adult education theory and practice is perplexing. How can instructors of adults become more learner centered in their practice? This ***ERIC Digest*** suggests guidelines and strategies that can be used in formal settings by instructors of adults to involve learners more effectively.

Andragogy Revisited

The following assumptions underlie Knowles' (1984) andragogical model:

- Adults tend to be self-directing.
- Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning.
- Since adults' readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something, they tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning as opposed to a subject-matter orientation.
- Adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal or intrinsic factors (such as helping their child with homework) as opposed to external or extrinsic forces (such as a raise in salary).

A logical outcome of these assumptions is the use of a collaborative teaching model that involves the learners as partners (Knowles 1980).

Pratt (1988) suggests that a number of situational variables (e.g., teacher or learner characteristics, institutional environment) affect the extent to which learner-centered instruction is appropriate or desired. In some situations, learners may need direction because they do not have the requisite skills and knowledge to be self-directed or they may need support because they lack confidence or are not committed to the learning endeavor. Therefore, adult learning in formal institutions can be viewed in terms of the direction and support needed by the learner in the following ways: learners need both direction and support, learners need direction, learners need support but are reasonably self-directing, or learners are moderately capable of providing their own direction and support (ibid.).

Pratt's model establishes the level of learners' competence in deciding what to learn and how to carry out the learning process (direction) and their competence to do so (support). These key factors provide the foundation for initiating a partnership between instructors and learners. Even though learners may need both direction and support, they can still be involved in designing and directing their learning in meaningful ways.

Assessing Learner Needs

Information about the amount and type of direction learners require can be obtained through a needs assessment. Adult learner involvement in needs assessment initiates a partnership with the instructor. Through needs assessment, adults can identify their problem areas in relation to the course topics, which are frequently a starting point for their learning (Cranton 1989). Vella (1994) suggests looking at the needs assessment process as the WWW question: who needs what as defined by whom, in which *who* is the learners, *what* are their needs, and *whom* are the definers. The key question is "How do we listen to adult learners before we design a course for them, so that their themes are heard and respected?" (ibid., p. 5). Before designing the course, some practical and feasible ways of involving a sample of learners who are representative of the class membership include using faxes, telephones, electronic mail, and focus groups. For multiple-session programs, the course content could be negotiated during the first session.

Creating an Effective Adult Learning Environment

Support for adult learners is provided through a learning environment that meets both their physical and psychological needs. Such a learning environment is also an essential element in successful partnerships between learners and instructors. Developing an atmosphere in which adults feel both safe and challenged should be the goal (Cranton 1989; Rogers 1989; Vella 1994). Any anxieties learners might have about appearing foolish or exposing themselves to failure should be eased, but they should not feel so safe that they do not question their current assumptions or are not challenged in other ways. Instructors need to balance being friendly with challenging learners (Rogers 1989). An ideal adult learning climate has a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which adults have permission for and are expected to share in the responsibility for their learning.

Suggestions for creating a learning environment that fosters a sense of support for and partnership with adults include the following:

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- **Capitalize on the first session.** First impressions are frequently lasting ones. The first session should create the foundation for a healthy learning partnership and set the tone for the balance of the program. Consider informal furniture arrangements with chairs in a circle or around a table and allow time for introductions, including information about the instructor. Even if the first session is devoted to needs assessment and discussing learner expectations for the course, provide written information about the course. Assignments should be discussed at the outset with the promise of a complete syllabus (incorporating learner input) at the next session. (Adapted from Apps 1991.)

- **Incorporate group work.** Well-designed group work can contribute to the development of a collaborative, participative learning environment in which the instructor is perceived as a partner. Small group activities foster the development of positive peer relationships among learners, which frequently have a much greater influence on learning than teacher-learner relationships. Informal, spontaneous groups can be used for short-term activities such as brainstorming; groups can also be formed around ongoing projects. Formal, ongoing groups often result in stronger affiliation among members of the small group than among members of the whole class.

- **Break the traditional classroom routine.** Deviating from the conventional practices associated with classrooms can help create an effective adult learning environment. A potluck or snacks during a class break can create opportunities for interaction and break down barriers between instructors and learners. For classes that meet more than six times, varying the meeting place can help add interest (Apps 1991). Before changing the class meeting location, however, all participants should be consulted to ensure the change does not conflict with any existing arrangements for transportation and child care.

- **Use humor.** Humor, which must be incorporated into regular classroom activities, can free creative capacities by providing novelty and helping learners break out of ruts. Humor can also help learners see the "human" side of the instructor. For example, by laughing at their own mistakes, instructors can help learners understand that errors are a normal part of the learning process. It goes without saying that instructors should never resort to sarcasm or ridicule for then humor becomes destructive. Properly used, however, humor can assist in building relationships between and among learners (Apps 1991).

- **Support opportunities for individual problem solving.** Adults have many responsibilities besides that of learner and consequently may feel a sense of isolation in their student role. If appropriate, instructors can encourage the formation of study groups (another opportunity for group work) to link those learners who may wish this type of support. In addition, instructors should always be available for individual conferences (Apps 1991).

Providing Equal Opportunity

A corollary of creating an effective learning environment is providing an equitable learning environment. Many adults—especially women, the elderly, the less affluent, members of minority communities, persons with disabilities, and the educationally disadvantaged—have not experienced support or equality in the learning environment. As a result, they have frequently felt disconnected and disengaged from the formal learning task. Engaging all learners as partners in the learning process requires that instructors—

- Consider their attitudes toward and knowledge about the variety of people they teach. Their expectations, behavior, and language may say something about the way they perceive people in general and the learners in particular. For example, do they respond differently to men than to women, to younger students than to older adults? Instructors have a professional responsibility to accept every adult learner as of equal worth regardless of race, gender, ability, or background.

- Think through the way they present their subjects or topics. The examples and images used should reflect and acknowledge the diversity of learners and of their experiences. Engaging learners in the process of extending beyond stereotypical or narrow examples can be another means of developing partnerships.

- Analyze their expectations for the potential of learners to ensure that they are not based on an individual's membership in a particular community. Instructors must act on the belief that change and development are possible for all people and that their role is to assist the process in all learners (Daines, Daines, and Graham 1993).

Conclusion

According to Rogers (1989), "Learning is part of a circuit that is one of life's fundamental pleasures: the [instructor's] role is to keep the current flowing" (p. 38). Instructors who have successfully engaged adults as partners by providing direction and support will have succeeded admirably.

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